

A Close Reading Analysis of Bud Light's PacMan Super Bowl Commercial

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Introduction

Bud Light's recent Super Bowl commercial has caught the attention of many, as it depicts an authentic, party-goer chosen to participate in a life-sized PacMan game located inside an epic party. The PacMan Super Bowl commercial is part of Bud Light's "Up for Whatever" campaign, targeted at young adults, or the millennial generation, with spontaneous, social mindsets. The millennial generation is focused less on material things and more on creating memorable experiences, and Bud Light has utilized this information throughout its campaign. The PacMan commercial portrays this wild, fantastical evening that the lucky chosen man is able to live out. Instead of focusing on the beer's quality, taste, or price, Bud Light is advertising the experience that could happen if the consumer is "up for whatever" while drinking the product. Bud Light effectively targets the millennial generation through its seemingly "real" qualities, its use of nostalgic marketing, and its focus on the experience instead of the product.

Method

This paper will analyze, interpret, and evaluate Bud Light's PacMan commercial through a close reading analysis. Heavily influenced by rhetoric scholar Michael Leff, this method unpacks an artifact to uncover its underlying messages and aims to reveal how an audience is encouraged to respond to it. Through a close reading analysis, critics can take a closer look at an artifact and its historical context to "discover what makes a particular text function persuasively" (Burghardt, 1995, p. 199). Michael Leff, and Andrew Sachs explain, "Working from the evidence within the text, the critic proceeds to make inferences about what the work is designed to do, how it is designed to do it, and how well that design functions to structure and transmit

meanings within the realm of public experience” (Leff and Sachs, 1990, p. 256). While this method is similar to a literary analysis, the close reading analysis “focuses on texts that are assumed to have been created as persuasive messages intended to sway audiences” (Salwen, 1996, p. 235). Because advertisements are created with the intention of persuading audiences to purchase a product, this method is fitting for this analysis. This paper provides an in-depth examination of the PacMan commercial and discusses the rhetorical strategies it employs to increase popularity with millennials and ultimately increase millennial consumption of Bud Light.

Justification

The PacMan Super Bowl commercial is particularly interesting to analyze because of its focus on the millennial generation. According to The Census Bureau, this year the millennial generation will become the largest living generation in the United States, which means they have a significant economic impact (Fry, 2015). Millennial marketing expert, Jeff Fromm, explains that now even consumers born before the millennial generation, years 1977 to 2000, are beginning to shop and interact with brands like millennials do. He notes that because of this, “marketing strategies that were developed when Boomers were young adults are no longer applicable to the most digitally driven population of consumers to date” (Fromm, 2015). Because marketing plays a critical role in what consumers are purchasing, and ultimately can affect the economy, studying these new strategies could reveal a lot about where marketing is heading. Brands will be forced to adapt to this new, changing generation and begin to utilize new strategies to reach the desired demographic. As the number one selling beer in the United States,

Bud Light's successes or failures with this new marketing strategy could potentially influence the ways that other brands decide to advertise (Tepper, 2012).

In addition, analyzing this commercial will shed light on the specific tactics Bud Light employs to manipulate consumers. The consumer would benefit from learning how he or she might be influenced by advertisements to purchase a product. By becoming aware of this process, consumers can make more thought out, active decisions when choosing a product.

Background

Anheuser-Busch was first established in the United States in the mid-1800s. It has since grown to be the world's largest brewer and is particularly popular in the United States. The company first introduced Bud Light in 1982, a lighter rendition of Budweiser that is targeted at a younger market. With the help of its slogan "Make it a Bud Light," Bud Light became the highest-selling beer in the US in 1994. Today, the beer remains in the number one spot partly due to its marketing success (Tepper, 2012).

Through advertising, Bud Light has always been geared toward the younger generation. In 2007, Bob Lachky, former chief creative officer of Anheuser-Busch, said that Bud Light is "a product that's fun and social -- that's what that generation of beer drinkers is about." Marlene Coulis, former Anheuser-Busch marketing chief, also revealed in 2007 that their advertising goal was to "win the entry-level beer drinker" (Lefton, 2007). Now, eight years later, Bud Light continues to target this market with a modern twist through its 'Up for Whatever' campaign. The campaign involves advertisements that feature real consumers, rather than actors, who are rewarded with incredible, once-in-a-lifetime opportunities because they are "up for whatever"

while consuming Bud Light. Nick Kelly, spokesperson for Bud Light, explains that “it’s really just finding people at drinking events, and if they’re drinking Bud Light, rewarding them with awesome experiences” (Telling, 2015). Consumers are also able to interact with the brand and with one another through social media, contests, and other features of the campaign. Messages are included on each Bud Light bottle intended to “inspire millions of consumers” and “encourage brand engagement” (Bud Light Website). Edward Ackerly, a marketing professor at the University of Arizona, noted that the campaign is very fitting to the millennial generation: “The target [market] loves to be spontaneous and do something fun associated with ordering a beer while out with friends... the entire campaign of ‘Up for Whatever’ goes very well with the target market.” With a reputation for creative commercials and with the pressure of remaining the nation’s top-selling beer, this meant advertising during the 2015 Super Bowl was crucial.

Now that millennials have entered the age to consume alcohol legally, it’s effective for Bud Light to target this generation, especially during an event as massive as the Super Bowl. The *International Business Times* reported that 114.4 million people sat down to watch this year’s Super Bowl, and it’s widely known that commercials make up a portion of the entertainment (Riccobono, 2015). Anheuser-Busch Vice President of US Marketing, Jorn Socquet, believed the Super Bowl was the perfect opportunity to reach out to the younger generation. “We’re going very hard after millennials,” he explained, “We have to win with these consumers and we know with the Super Bowl, we have their undivided attention” (Brown, 2015). Watching the Super Bowl and drinking beer are often associated with one another, and with so many legal-aged millennials watching the game, this was a prime opportunity for Bud Light to advertise.

Description

The commercial begins with three average-looking guys who appear to be around their mid-to-late 20s walking into a crowded bar, where they are soon greeted by a female bartender. This scene is shown through hidden camera angles and what is assumed to be security camera footage. The use of dim lighting and muffled background chatter from inside the bar works to make viewers feel as if they are actually there. What appears to be a production crew is shown in a security room, carefully watching the men via the security cameras. This set up is intended to demonstrate that Bud Light has a surprise planned for an unexpected, real young adult. The bartender asks the name of one of the men, Riley, and says, "If I give you a Bud Light, are you up for whatever happens next?" Looking slightly confused, Riley responds with an enthusiastic "Yeah!" She hands him the Bud Light and he reads its label aloud: "The perfect beer for stepping outside for some old school fun." Unsure of its meaning, he shrugs and high-fives the bartender, exclaiming "Let's do this!"

Hidden cameras capture Riley and his two friends walking down the street, embarking on their adventure. A massive, fake quarter lies in the middle of the sidewalk, in front of a metal-looking wall with a large "coin slot" opening. Riley picks up the giant quarter and slides it into the "coin slot," triggering a recognizable PacMan sound effect, and opening the metal door. On the other side of the door is a massive party, filled with hundreds of screaming young adults, cheering for him to come inside. "Woo!" he screams with both surprise and excitement. As he enters, the huge crowd parts down the middle to create a pathway for him. A woman with a microphone appears at his side and escorts him through the crowd. "You are PacMan" she tells

Riley and leads him up the stairs to where a real, life-sized PacMan Game awaits. An announcer's voice booms: "3, 2, 1, go!"

Riley begins the game of PacMan, running through the vibrantly blue, lit up maze. A DJ is playing an upbeat electronic remix of the original PacMan theme song, and strobe lights flash as the crowd cheers Riley on. The camera pans out so the game can be viewed from above, and it looks identical to the traditional arcade game. All of the official PacMan sound effects are heard throughout the game while the electronic music thumps in the background. The crowd is shown dancing and cheering, consuming Bud Light as they watch, portraying the ultimate party atmosphere. Finally Riley defeats the game and the crowd goes wild. "We have a winner!" the announcer's voice booms. A woman is standing nearby and hands him a Bud Light. "Woo! This is all I've wanted all day!" Riley proclaims as he grabs the beer and audience members hoist him up and carry him toward the crowd. "I love this life!" he exclaims and clinks his Bud Light with those around him. The camera zooms out once again so the crowd is shown dancing to the loud music and cheering beneath flashing lights. The commercial cuts to an image of a refreshing-looking Bud Light bottle sitting on a bar top. Next to it in large white letters reads "The Perfect Beer for Whatever Happens."

Analysis & Interpretation: Constructing Reality

One of the most significant features of the commercial is its emphasis on a "real experience." This is initially displayed in the beginning of the commercial, as Riley and his friends enter the bar. "Hidden" cameras capture this footage, which literally say "hidden camera" at the bottom right of the screen. The use of "hidden" cameras conveys the idea that Riley and

his friends aren't aware they're being filmed, and therefore aren't aware of what the night will entail. The use of dim lighting in the bar and loud background voices of others at the bar attempts to make viewers feel as if they're actually there. The bar is reasonably crowded with other good-looking, younger adults conversing with one another. Neon bar signs hang in the windows behind them, which adds to the bar's authentic feel. It literally appears as if a normal guy enters a bar and is randomly selected. When asked if he's "up for whatever happens next," Riley's casual shrug and confused facial expression reveal he's unsure of what actually will happen next. From a viewer's perspective, his response seems candid, which further promotes the idea that the experience will be a "real" one. When the doors first open to the PacMan game, Riley displays an authentically surprised facial expression, and his other reactions throughout the commercial seem natural and unrehearsed. Before the PacMan game begins, he let's out an overwhelmed "What in the world?" and while crowd-surfing at the end of the ad, he exclaims, "What is going on?!" These particular exclamations were probably featured in the commercial to further contribute to the idea that he was an unsuspecting candidate. After the commercial aired, in several interviews Riley has assured he isn't an actor and had "no idea at all" (Telling). While this may be true, every other aspect of the commercial is fake. In reality, the commercial took months of planning and required cutting-edge technology, including over 45 different cameras and intricate lighting production ("Super Bowl," 2015). In addition, Riley must be microphoned, because the hidden cameras pick up his voice clearly in the noisy bar, while he's walking down the street, and while he's racing through the PacMan game. He might not have known what the night specifically entailed, but it is unlikely he was an average person walking into a bar who was randomly selected. In fact, Riley is arguably the only real component to the commercial.

Even the 2500 partiers inside the game's set are part of the commercial - not just random people partying and drinking Bud Light. Riley's experience and reaction may have been real, but the party around him was not.

The editing of the commercial also feeds into the real idea. The scenes cut from the bar to Riley and his friends walking down the street, as if they've randomly stumbled upon this gigantic quarter laying on the ground. One might assume that direction was given to Riley of where to walk to and what to do with the quarter. Otherwise, he could have easily walked right by it. If the commercial had shown producers directing Riley on where to go or what to do with the quarter, the event would seem more planned and calculated, which would take away from the "real" concept. By conveying that Riley and his friends have found the quarter by chance, it adds to the spontaneity of the event, and makes his surprised reaction more authentic. During this scene, the camera switches back and forth from hidden camera to an actual close-up camera, which demonstrates that the hidden cameras weren't necessarily needed. Professional cameras were present to capture the coin slot scene, but hidden camera angles are shown from above as well to reinforce the "real" factor. There also aren't any cars or any other people on the street Riley walks down, which is extremely rare for downtown Los Angeles. This is because Bud Light blocked off the street to make room for the PacMan game, which was the size of an NFL football field, but one might not notice or realize that while watching the commercial (Makuch, 2015). The fantastical idea of a life-sized PacMan game is anything but real, but through using a authentic-looking bar, camera angles, and use of a non-actor, Bud Light attempts to portray this "real" idea in order to appeal to millennials.

The young adult generation now responds to advertisements from corporations differently. According to Suzanne Fanning, President of Word of Mouth Marketing Association, “Millennials are the most connected generation of buyers the world has ever seen, but they don’t trust companies or CEOs - they trust their friends and connections, and they want to hear about real experiences from real people” (Fromm, 2015). Bud Light addresses this cynicism through the “real” aspect of the commercial. This same idea is applied to all of the advertisements in the “Up for Whatever” campaign, as they all feature unsuspecting young adults, not actors. By using actual people who millennials can identify with, viewers can see this real experiences that Bud Light presents in each commercial. The end goal is that millennials see this incredible experience Bud Light delivered to a real, average guy and associate this real, epic party with positive feelings regarding the brand.

Analysis & Interpretation: Nostalgia Marketing

Another effort to appeal to the millennial generation is done through the life-sized PacMan concept, in general, which generates feelings of nostalgia in viewers. PacMan is a popular arcade game from the 1980s that almost everyone is familiar with, especially the mainstream American culture watching the Super Bowl. Nick Kelly, spokesperson for Bud Light, explained that using a life-sized PacMan game was a very strategic decision. “That game really brings that sentimental moment from when you used to play it,” Kelly says. “It transcends the demographics... You may never have even played it, but everyone knows what it is” (Telling, 2015). The commercial depicted the game perfectly and in great detail, so it would resonate with viewers as much as possible. Jason Enos, Marketing Director of Bandai Namco

Games, the creator of PacMan, who contributed to the commercial explained that “everything was done to scale, to the exact tee of the original maze” (Makuch, 2015). Small details, down to the moving eyes of the brightly colored ghosts, for example, were replicated exactly. The walls of the maze lit up in electric blue colors, round white lights on the ground represent the pellets that PacMan (in this case, Riley) collects, and neon-colored flying ghosts are identical to those in the game. All of the authentic sound effects were used, and a DJ performs a remix of the original PacMan theme song. An overhead view of Riley running through the maze, as well as close-ups following right behind him give viewers a detailed look at the game. The goal is for viewers to feel as if they are there, inside the PacMan game, or wish that they could be. Without showing specific details or including the real sound effects, the full nostalgic effect wouldn’t be employed. Bud Light wants to convey the most accurate, life-sized game as possible to really trigger those nostalgic feelings in viewers.

This idea of triggering nostalgia is a newer marketing tactic, known as nostalgia marketing. In his article *As Millennials Get Nostalgic, So Do Brands*, Jeff Fromm defines nostalgia marketing as “marketing that is aimed at evoking a feeling of nostalgia in a target market.” He goes on to explain that millennials are approaching the age where they begin to feel nostalgic, and digital technology has been a huge part of their upbringing. Humans enjoy reminiscing and thinking back to times that were happier and simpler, particularly in their youth. Fromm explains that “By positioning their products or services in a nostalgia context, companies link themselves with happier times in the minds of Millennial consumers” (Fromm, 2015). This is clearly done through Bud Light’s use of the PacMan game, an extremely popular arcade game that many are familiar with. If viewers can connect their positive memories of playing PacMan to

drinking Bud Light, this subconscious positive association may affect how they view the product. It's also worthy to point out that the nostalgic impact of the PacMan game may be stronger than a celebrity endorsement. Bud Light has previously featured celebrities in its commercials, like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Don Cheadle and Minka Kelly in last year's Super Bowl ad, but this year did not use a celebrity at all. The nostalgia associated with PacMan may have been enough to replace a celebrity in this year's commercial.

Analysis & Interpretation: Creating an "Experience"

The last notable tactic and overarching theme that Bud Light uses in the PacMan commercial is the idea of a memorable experience. Close-ups of the dancing, cheering crowd with the thumping music in the background paints the picture of this fun, wild atmosphere. The inviting, flashing lights and crowd comprised of young, good-looking people makes viewers want to be a part of the experience. Everything portrayed in the commercial emphasizes this insane, fantastical experience, and advertises the party, not the beer. Not once is the taste, quality, or price of the product addressed; Bud Light is merely the drink that the party-goers consume while experiencing the event. This demonstrates the idea Bud Light is advertising an experience, and the beverage is simply a prop throughout the ad.

The mindset of the younger generation is changing - young adults used to focus on material things, but now the millennial generation has become fixated on memorable experiences. Bud Light has used this information to create the "Up for Whatever" campaign, which features commercials of similar adventures to the PacMan ad. In the Forbes article *The Secret to Bud Light's Millennial Marketing Success*, Jeff Fromm writes that millennials "The

campaign was built to enhance consumer's understanding of why people come together... the friendships, the experiences and the memories." Because the entire focus of the commercial is on the party and PacMan game, this suggests Bud Light is advertising an experience, not just a beer, in hopes that this experience will be attractive to viewers.

Alexander Lambrecht, Vice President of Bud Light, reaffirms this when he stated that, "If we want to win with Bud Light to millennials, we need to offer them experiences... Without the cool experience, we have no content. And without the cool content, our cool experience is only going to reach a very limited number of people" (Channick, 2015). In a behind the scenes video about the commercial, Miller Jones, the Creative Director and Writer at Energy BBDO explains that the ad "became sort of this one part live event, one part commercial, one part giant once in a lifetime experience for this completely unsuspecting guy... [which] all happened because this guy and his friends were up for whatever." This further supports that the commercial aims to advertise the "experience" concept. With the ad's intense focus on the PacMan game and the party, the beer itself is placed in the background. The commercial instead advertises what could happen if someone is "up for whatever" while consuming the product. If viewers can positively associate these fun experiences with the product, then Bud Light's goals have been met.

Evaluation

It's difficult to tell if the commercial alone has increased millennial consumption of the product, but it is definitely apparent that the rhetorical strategies employed were aimed these consumers. This paper has provided evidence that suggests millennials will respond positively to the "real" aspect of the commercial, nostalgia marketing, and the emphasis on the "experience."

Regardless of whether or not millennial consumption of Bud Light has increased, this commercial is effective in achieving its goal: appealing to millennials. A close reading analysis looks at how an audience is encouraged to respond, and this commercial clearly hopes its audience will respond positively and ultimately purchase the product.

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